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William John Thoms
Excerpt
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I.

SHAKESPEARE IN GERMANY.

(1840.)



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THE following Letter was written at the request of the kind friend to whom it was addressed, for the purpose of being communicated to the Society of Antiquaries on the 21st May, 1840, when the late Prince Consort attended and signed the List of Fellows. But His Royal Highness having promised to attend the Royal Society after leaving the Antiquaries, there was not time for the reading of any papers, and this communication was consequently made to the Society on the following Thursday.

Mr. Theodore Hooke, who was present at the reading, having expressed a wish to publish it in the "New Monthly Magazine," which was then under his editorship, it was printed in the July 1840 Number of that Journal.

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ON THE
 CONNECTION BETWEEN THE EARLY ENGLISH
 AND EARLY GERMAN DRAMA,
 AND ON THE PROBABLE ORIGIN OF
 SHAKESPEARE'S "TEMPEST."

In a Letter to Thomas Amyot, Esq., F.R.S., Treas. S. A.

MY DEAR SIR,

REASONS for addressing the present letter to you, are as plenty as blackberries; and I need no compulsion, nor is it necessary that I should be at the strappado or all the racks in the world, to give you two of them. The first is, that you take an interest, and are well versed in all matters connected with Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and have done good services to Shakespearian literature; and the second, because it affords me an opportunity of acknowledging and thanking you for many acts of kindness, not the least of them being your introduction of me to that Prospero, whose library was dukedom large enough, but whose cell is now untenanted, whose staff is broken, and with its great master now

"Buried certain fathoms in the earth"—

I mean of course our much regretted friend, the late

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Mr. Douce, who would, I am sure, had he been living, have read with some interest the observations to which I now beg to call your attention.

It is many years since I first “made a prief in my note-book,” that at the close of the sixteenth and commencement of the seventeenth century, Germany was visited by a company of English players; but never, until very recently, have I had an opportunity of referring to the authority for this statement, and ascertaining the more minute particulars which are there recorded, relative to this curious and, hitherto, unnoticed fact in the history of the early English drama.

That the dramatists of England exercised a great and beneficial influence in the direction which they gave to the genius of their German brethren, has never been questioned. The German critics have for the most part agreed upon this point, which has been more especially insisted upon by Tieck, distinguished among his countrymen, not only as a poet, a novelist, and a critic, but also for his deeper reverence and profounder knowledge of our immortal bard—to the study of whose writings, and those of his contemporaries, many years of his life have been almost exclusively devoted. He it was, moreover, who first showed how actively and immediately this influence was employed, by proving that about the year 1600, many of the productions of the English dramatists were translated into German, and performed before the German public by a company of comedians, who were known at that time as the English company.

This singular fact was first announced by Tieck in the year 1817, when he commenced the publication of his “German Theatre,” a work which was intended

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to furnish his countrymen with a selection of the most remarkable productions of the German stage, which, from being scattered throughout a number of volumes, many of them of the greatest rarity, were for the most part inaccessible to the general reader. In short, Tieck intended to do for the German drama what Dodsley had so successfully accomplished for the English. But though he proposed to extend his collection to six volumes only, he met with so little encouragement, that no more than the first and second ever appeared. Each volume has a preface illustrative of the works it contains, with an account of their authors, and the state of the stage when they wrote—the plays themselves being arranged chronologically. In the first volume there are two of the Shrovetide plays by Hans Rosenplut, six pieces by Hans Sachs, five by Jacob Ayrer, and one from the German collection of English plays, to which I shall presently have occasion to direct your attention. It is in his remarks upon the life and writings of Ayrer, that Tieck mentions the circumstance to which I have already alluded.

Jacob Ayrer, the successor of Hans Sachs as a writer for the German stage, was a proctor and notary at Nuremberg, where he lived probably till about 1618, in which year, and as it appears shortly after his death, the goodly folio which contains his “Opus Dramaticum,” was first published in that city. Nothing further indeed is known of him, nor even the date of his birth, nor the period during which he wrote his numerous dramas. Koch says he composed his several works between 1570 and 1589, but adduces no evidence in support of this statement. Gottsched mentions his German version of Frischlin’s “Julius

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Redivivus," as being published at Worms in 1585; but from internal evidence it is obvious that it was written in 1610; whilst, from a passage in his Whitsun play of "The Process against the Tyranny of Queen Podagra," it is clear that that piece was written in 1602.

Tieck, who was of opinion that, with the exception perhaps of his Whitsun plays, few of Ayrer's pieces were written before 1610, describes them as consisting partly of imitations of English models, and partly of original pieces written in the style of his prototype Hans Sachs, with the addition of a professed jester or merry-maker, whom he styles sometimes Jahn Posset, sometimes the English fool, occasionally also Jahn Clahm, from which it may be inferred, that when he drew the character, he had the clown of the old English drama before his eyes.

It is when showing the means by which Ayrer acquired a knowledge of the models from which he is supposed to have copied, that Tieck brings forward the fact, that, about the year 1600, a company of comedians called the English Company traversed Germany, performing German translations of English plays at all the principal courts and chief cities of the empire.

"Such," said Tieck, "was the popularity which the stage enjoyed in London, and such was its reputation on the continent, that troops of players occasionally proceeded to the Netherlands, for the purpose of exhibiting their performances; and we can trace in Germany about the year 1600 (probably some years earlier), the existence of a company of comedians who, under the title of the English Company, travelled the country round, for the purpose of giving the German public some idea, however imperfect, of the

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height which poetry and the dramatic art had attained in England.” He adds, that he had himself ascertained the dates of the years in which these comedians performed before the court of Dresden, but had unfortunately mislaid the notes he had made of them.

Tieck does not decide who these actors really were; whether they were natives of England; or young Germans connected with the Hanse Company, then established in London; or persons who had travelled from Germany to England on a theatrical speculation, for the purpose of securing a stock of new dramas; but his description of the volume of German translations of English plays, published in Germany in 1620, which he supposes to have emanated from them, would seem to favour the supposition that they were, as their name implies, a company of English players. The same inference may be drawn from one clear instance which Tieck gives of English actors being found in Germany. He is speaking of the marks of distinction with which professed players were then received in that country, and after stating that the magistrates of the different cities were in the habit of going out to meet them on their approach, he adds that Lassenius, one of the earliest actors whose name is preserved, and who, as he was playing about the year 1600, might possibly have belonged to this very troop, became afterwards a doctor of theology; and another Hans von Stockfisch (probably an assumed theatrical name), received a salary of two hundred dollars, and other allowances, from John Sigmund of Brandenburg, for whom he procured a company of comedians from *England* and the Netherlands about the year 1614.

Tieck, who regards the English company of come-

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dians as having exercised an extraordinary influence on the German drama, by the direction which they gave to the theatrical compositions of Jacob Ayrer, describes very fully the extremely interesting volume which he supposes to have emanated from them. It was first printed in 1620, and its quaint, old-fashioned title, may be thus translated: “English Comedies and Tragedies; that is, right pleasant, noble and select, spiritual and worldly Comedies and Tragedies, with the humours of Pickle Herring—which on account of their pleasant invention, merry conceits, and true histories, have been acted and performed by the Englishmen in Germany, at the royal, electoral, and princely courts, and in all the great free cities of the empire, but have never before been printed. Now published and set forth for the gratification and delight of all lovers of comedy and tragedy, &c. &c.”

To this volume a second and a third were subsequently added; neither of them, however, contains any thing of importance. But the original collection, which is of exceeding rarity, although a second edition appeared in 1630, contains, in addition to a number of interludes, merriments, or jigs, no less than eight old English dramatic pieces, translated into the very commonest German prose, printed very incorrectly, and in a language which seems to have been written down from the recitation of unskilful actors, being filled with uncouth phrases and words misapplied—the construction of the sentences any thing but German, and the whole abounding with coarse equivoques and obscene allusions. The first of these is the “History of Esther and Haman,” which Tieck speaks of as having been played in London in 1594, and even earlier, and which we learn from Mr. Collier’s ad-

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mirable *Annals of the Stage*, was printed by William Pickering, in 1561. Tieck describes this piece, though a mere sketch, as being clearly the work of a theatrical poet who understood stage effect, so that the arrangement and connection of the scenes betray quite a different spirit from the historical plays of Hans Sachs, or those which Ayler composed when not imitating a foreign model. The comic character in it, who is called Hans Knapcase, has the same struggles for mastery with his wife as the Jahn Posset of Ayler's Whitsun play, and Edward III., but with some additional jests. Hans is the carpenter who builds the gallows for Haman, who, however, hangs himself, so that Hans is unnecessarily dragged into the scene.

The second is the "Prodigal Son," which Tieck describes as being more skilfully and cleverly composed.

This is followed by the "History of Fortunatus," which Tieck has reprinted in the second volume of his collection, and respecting which he remarks that it is interesting to observe how skilfully the author has treated the subject, which is one by no means well adapted to the stage. A play with the title of "Fortunatus" had been performed in London, in 1595, or earlier. It was remodelled in 1600 by Decker, who, from the subject being so well known, entitled his work "The Old Fortunatus." This remodelled version by Decker, which, whatever may now be thought of it, laid the foundation of the celebrity which he afterwards enjoyed, was not the one used by the English company in Germany; and from this circumstance Tieck concludes, and apparently with great reason, that they had left London some time before the year 1600.

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The fourth piece, which appears to be one of the oldest, is “a triumphant comedy,” entitled, “Of a Son of the King of England, and a Daughter of the King of Scotland.” The plot is very simple, and turns upon the circumstance of the English Prince, during a war with England and Scotland, falling in love with the daughter of his enemy, and procuring a truce in order that he may visit his beloved in the disguise of a jester. The prince, who is called *Serule*, being the comic character of the piece, there is no clown introduced into it.

The fifth play, which bears the fewest traces of its English origin, is called “*Sidonea and Theagenea*,” and consists of a mere love story, during the progress of which the peasant *Cnemon* and his sweetheart are by no means sparing of coarse jests.

The sixth of these dramas is one of the most remarkable, from the very bold manner in which it combines old English history and allegory. It abounds in satire, which is very spirited, even in the wretched translation, and is the same piece which was printed in London in 1603, under the title of “*Nobody and Somebody; with the true chronicle History of Elydure, who was fortunately three times crowned King of England.*”

This is followed by the tragedy of “*Julio and Hypolita*,” which is almost the same as Shakespeare’s “*Two Gentlemen of Verona*,” except that in the German piece, at the wedding, the deceived friend stabs the false one, who has certainly carried on his intrigue very clumsily—the bride murders herself, and her lover follows her example. The clown of the play is called *Grobianus Pickleherring*. Tieck tells us that the piece is only very roughly and briefly given, much